

Commencement Address of Honorable Robert L. Sumwalt, III
Member, National Transportation Safety Board
to the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Commencement
Daytona Beach, Florida
May 10, 2016

Good morning, Eagles! And, congratulations!!

This is a very special week. I get to be here to celebrate your graduation, and this weekend I will travel to North Carolina for my daughter's college graduation.

Obtaining a college degree is a huge accomplishment. Today you are standing at the threshold of your future – a future that will be propelled by your Embry-Riddle education.

As you begin this exciting next step in your lives, allow me to offer you some simple words of guidance that have served me well.

Do what you love. Do it well. And, do it with Passion, Integrity, and Professionalism.

Growing up I assumed my path would lead me to become an engineer. My grandfather was an engineer, my dad was an engineer. Both had graduate degrees from MIT. My grandfather had been the dean of engineering at University of South Carolina. In fact, the engineering school at USC was named the Robert L. Sumwalt School of Engineering. So, what do you think I thought I'd be?

There was just one problem - I didn't want to be an engineer. I wanted to be a pilot. And, frankly, calculus – well, let's just say that although I finally made an A in it, it wasn't on the first try.

My senior year in high school I started flying, so by the time I entered as a college freshman, I was hooked. It became a passion. Within a month of entering college, I convinced the dean of students that we needed a flying club. I spent most of my time dealing with the flying club and working on my pilot ratings and certificates. The good news was that I was building lots of flying time. The bad news was that those calculus grades weren't getting any better. And, did I mention that chemistry was eating my lunch, also.

After a fairly unceremonious year in engineering, I summoned the courage to tell my grandfather that I wanted a career in aviation, not engineering.

I thought he would be disappointed, as if I was somehow letting the family down. But he told me – “Robert, the secret to life is very simple - do what you love, do it well and do it with passion.” He pointed out that people spend most of their lives at work, and if you're not happy in your job, then you probably won't be happy in life.

And with that, I had “permission” to pursue my dreams, my own passion. I haven’t regretted it one day of my life.

Perhaps you, yourself, have struggled with a similar situation. Perhaps there are people here today in your family who have wondered why you didn’t follow the careers that others in your family have followed. Perhaps you’ve heard statements like: “Why can’t be a lawyer like your brother?” Perhaps there are those who may have wondered why you got into this “aviation thing,” and wondered what you’ll do when you “grow up.”

Well, what my grandfather told me that day 41 years ago was the best advice I’ve ever been given, so I wanted to share it with you today. Do what you love and do it with passion.

In addition to that I believe there are two other elements of success. Integrity and professionalism.

Integrity. Your integrity is your greatest asset. It is one of those key metrics that others will use to judge you, depending on the degree that you either have or don’t have.

I once heard former Secretary of Transportation Andy Card say: *Leaders have the courage to stand alone.*” And as an airline pilot, as an aviation manager, and now as a NTSB Board Member, I have found it necessary to occasionally stand alone. I can tell you that it *does* take courage.

As an airline captain, it took courage to refuse to take off in weather that I didn’t believe it was safe, when other airplanes were departing. As a board member, there have been occasions where I have been completely outnumbered by a 4 to 1 vote. It *does* take courage to stand alone.

But it is those moments when we choose to go against the grain, to stick to an unpopular stance, and take the heat that comes with it that we discover the calibration of our moral compass and find out what we’re really made of.

Wisdom is knowing the right path to take. Integrity is taking it.

Professionalism. Over the nearly ten years I’ve been on the NTSB, we’ve seen too many accidents where the NTSB found where a lack of professionalism was a factor in the accident.

My second week at the NTSB began with my being launched to Lexington, KY for airline accident that claimed 49 lives. The crew attempted to take off on a runway that was not long enough. In concluding the investigation, the Safety Board found that the crew’s noncompliance with standard operating procedures, and their violation of the sterile cockpit regulation, most likely created an atmosphere in the cockpit that enabled the crew’s errors.

There were others.

I remember one cockpit voice recording where just after starting engines, the captain stated, “I’m ambivalent right now. I got six months to go.”

Quite simply, he wasn’t mentally in the ball game when the emergency unfolded.

Just remember: The people who entrust you with their lives don’t want someone who is ambivalent. A hallmark of an aviator’s professionalism is insistence on strict adherence to procedures, checklist usage, and sterile cockpit compliance.

So, yes, the NTSB has witnessed too many cases where professionalism was lacking, but as one who flew for a living for almost three decades, I can say that the majority of the flights in this country do operate with high degrees of professionalism. But, I worry about those that don’t.

Integrity and professionalism. They are essential ingredients in any occupation, but especially important in aviation and in the fields that many of you will pursue.

Finally, I want to encourage you to not place artificial barriers in your life. Years ago researchers at an aquarium placed a glass partition in one of large fish tanks. They bisected the tank with this glass partition. Right after the partition was put in place, the fish would bump their nose as they swam their circuits. But, soon they learned it was there and would then swim right up to it and then make their sharp turn to continue their circuit.

After a while, the researchers removed the partition. What do you think the fish did? They would swim right up the point where the partition had been and then make their sharp turn. They thought there was a barrier there, but it wasn’t.

I think sometimes we do that in our lives – we place artificial barriers that prevent us from doing something we aspire to do.

In my case, I had a secret dream. Ever since I started reading NTSB accident reports as a freshman in college I had a secret dream that one day I would be a Member of the NTSB. But, like many dreams, it probably would never happen. But, remarkably, one day a good friend of mine, Captain Bill Weeks came up to me and said “You’ve always wanted to be on the NTSB. Now is the time to go for it.” I probably would have never gone for it had it not been for Bill saying that. After all, I would never get it. I wasn’t smart enough. There were too many other people vying for it. I had all of the excuses. I had put an artificial barrier in my life.

Remove those barriers from your lives. Don’t let anything or anyone keep you from fulfilling your dreams.

Many of you will travel extensively in your careers. But as you stand on the brink of that great adventure, I hope you will remember that it’s not the quantity of the miles, but the quality of the journey. When you do what you love with passion, with integrity, and with professionalism, you will have a worthwhile journey.

Thank you very much. Good luck, and may God Bless America.